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A Study of Social Injustice in Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* and K.A.Gunasekaran's *The Scar*

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Dalit autobiographies revolve around notions of the *contemporary* and *authenticity* that are found in the knowledge gained from direct experiences of authors in the caste-ridden society. Autobiographies give an insight into the documentary truth of caste system and its impact on the lives of Dalits in a broad political and historical context. Dalit autobiographies reveal painful insights of social injustice which have been haunting the underprivileged. Socio-economic inequalities and exclusions have been a part of the lives of the Dalits in India. Post-independent Indian Constitution has committed to ensure social justice to the citizens of India. But it is no longer effective so as to save the underprivileged. This paper discusses various forms of social injustices and the consequent challenges thrown at the Dalits portrayed in the works of two writers, Omprakash Valmiki's (Uttar Pradesh) *Joothan* and K.A. Gunasekaran's (Tamil Nadu) *The Scar*.

Omprakash Valmiki, in his autobiography, **Joothan**, describes that Chuhra, one of the Dalit Communities, lived near Chandrabhan Taga's (an upper caste man) cattle shed standing close to Dabbowali pond. Omprakash Valmiki, the author and his family lived in this colony. Chuhra did all sorts of work for the Tagas without wages. Nobody dared to refuse this unpaid work for which they received neither money nor grain. This injustice of denying wage is one form of exploitation, even today, by the upper caste people which leads to starvation. Pejorative is another psychological degradation imposed on the Dalits. This pejorative implication undervalues their aspiration to a better standard of life. Ram Masihi, with the guidance of a Christian, took Omprakash to the Basic Primary School and begged Master Har Phool Singh for admission. But Omprakash was not allowed to sit on the mat and drink water. He sat behind everybody. The children of the Tyagis would tease him by calling "Chuhre Ka" – a pejorative term which means, "You son of Chuhra, mean birth." When Omprakash was in the fourth class, Bishambar Singh, the headmaster, said "You are a Chuhre

ka, your work is to sweep the school clean." Omprakash cleaned all the classes. In addition, Bishambar Singh ordered him to clean the playground as well. This injustice to a Dalit school boy continued three days. Omprakash was not allowed to attend the classes. Unable to bear the pain of injustice, he feebly narrated all the matters to his father. His father went to the school for justice. But, Bishambar Singh threatened to terminate him from school. The descendant of a Dalit was threatened for being in the class room. A few Hindu conservative teachers did not tolerate the progress of the Dalits.

Sukhdev Singh Tyagi's daughter's marriage was held. Omprakash's mother was sitting outside the dinning-hall with her basket along with Omprakash and his sister, Maya, to collect the left-overs in the basket. His mother requested Chowdhuriji for something more on a leaf plate. But he scolded his mother in a derogatory language. When Dalits begged food, they were either insulted or sometimes threatened. Omprakash was involved in politics also. His relatives never gave him support for his social involvement. Therefore, Omprakash discontinued his studies at DAV College, and joined in the Instrument Research and Development Establishment. In this institution, he enjoyed all facilities including library and games. He learnt Chess game and studied Marxist philosophy and Russian literature. He also believed that the centuries-old inferiority complex affected a segment of the Dalits, and this compelled them to hide their identity as Dalits.

Omprakash met Kureishi who was in-charge of the police station at the ordinance factory. They became good friends. At this point of time, a new Commandant of the DSC arrived from Muzaffarnagar District, near Barla. Omprakash was asked to get acquainted with the Commandant by Kureishi, but Omprakash hesitated to meet the Commandant. Omprakash, Chandrakala, Mrs.Kureishi and Kureishi met the Commandant Sahib, and introduced Omprakash to him. In the sphere of education and employment, Dalits were victims to the injustice of caste-tracing. The Commandant traced Omprakash's caste and did not allow him to sit before him. Before they were asked to sit, the Sahib asked:

Before we even sat down, he asked, "Barla is a Tyagi village. Which caste are you from?" I looked at Kureishi, whose face had changed color. He had asked the question conversationally. The moment I said that my caste was Chuhra, the Commandant became uneasy . . . This was a new experience for Kureishi. (134)

From the birth place and dialect, the caste of a person could be determined. After enquiring about Omprakash's native place, the Commandant moved to enquire about his caste. Even though he was a Commandant, he gave respect for people only after knowing about their

caste. Omprakash did not want to hide his caste; rather he was ready to struggle with caste facet. His encounter with various school teachers and officers shows how Dalit children were insulted verbally and physically. There is no one to rescue the Dalits even after 1950. Omprakash has encapsulated the pains of injustice and humiliation showered on the Dalits in his autobiography.

K.A. Gunasekaran's autobiography, **The Scar** emphasizes the fact that Indian villages are interwoven with the problems of caste and cruelty. The author narrates the familiar tale of caste oppression and prejudice prevalent in the Indian society. The narration unfolds his deep pains and sufferings from the childhood itself. He confronted the life experiences of a Paraya – an aboriginal agricultural community and one of the Dalit communities formerly known as untouchables – from Elyankudi village in Ramanathapuram district, Tamil Nadu. The Dalits were forced to live in filthy enclaves segregated from the main land of upper-caste residents. The narration begins with the author's recollection of his days which he spent in the surrounding villages of Elayankudi. Gunasekaran felt caste-tracing for the first time while studying sixth, seventh, and eighth standards. A school clerk would enter the class and ask as portrayed by Gunasekaran in his autobiography:

"How many in this class are Parayars? he would ask. Put up your hands! How many are Pallars? Stand up, I will count. Look, all of you should come to the office after class to pick up your scholarship forms which should be filled up within a week's time. . . ." They would reinforce caste identities by labelling us Pallar, Parayars and Chakiliyas. . . . (5)

In the early period of his boyhood, Gunasekaran recognized caste discrimination. In spite of this, he was respected by Muslim friends by his mannerisms. He was a good singer. The Congress Party leader, Kamaraj, appreciated his voice, and offered him a bottle of "Kalimark" colour-soda, aerated water. He was also allowed to sing the prayer song and the National Anthem at school. Later he sung on the All India Radio, Trichy, and became popular as Elayankudi Gunasekaran. His brother, Karunanidhi, enrolled himself in the Harijan Hostel for free education.

Every year, when the school re-opened, his father used to ask rich Muslims to help for the cause of Gunasekaran's education. Whenever Gunasekaran needed signature for the scholarship application, the village headman (VAO) and the *Karnam* used to humiliate him and his father. The headman would ask Gunasekaran to go on errands before signing the application forms. It is another form of injustice to a Dalit man:

If they saw us in the village they would ask us to tie up their cattle, dig out a canal, etc. and only then would they sign the forms. Father would feel frustrated every time he had to approach them for their signature. "It's horrid, the way they display their caste superiority before they sign anything," he would say. (9)

Gunasekaran was mentally stormed by the injustice and ill treatment of the headman. The magnitude of caste superiority devastated him in his boyhood itself. This psychological injustice made a deep scar in his heart. It is a bitter social experience every Dalit undergoes in every corner of India even today.

Gunasekaran worked in his relative's shop with a gift sheet hung in front of the Thovoor school. Any person could scratch spots on the gift sheet as many times as he wants. If lucky, he would get a gift for making a right scratch. If unlucky, there would be no number in the space he scratched, and he would get no gift. A high caste boy scratched so many spots on the gift sheet, but he gave no money to Gunasekaran, the shop-assistant. When Gunasekaran asked for money, the boy said, "Get lost Paraya," and begun to run. He chased the boy into the street and his house. The boy yelled and called his parents. In the same evening, eight upper-caste men came with the boy to Gunasekaran's "periamma's" (aunt) house and insulted him. His relatives fell at their feet and requested them to spare Gunasekaran, but the upper-caste men openly insulted him:

'Ayya, he is my younger sister's son and is brought up in a town. He does not know anything about our village ways.' The men kept asking, 'How can a fellow from your caste enter the upper caste street? And worse, how dare he enter our house.'

'If the fellow had entered our house without knowing the limitations of his caste, then he must really be very arrogant. Where is he? Let's tie up his feet and hands, and carry him away', they shouted.

I was panic-stricken. (26)

In the same day evening, a few upper-caste people entered his colony. There was no resistance by the Dalit, rather the Dalits had to be obedient. As advised by the Konar people, Gunasekaran left Elyangudi. Since boyhood, he never faced any form of discrimination with the Muslims. In school days, he did weeding work in farm land to earn money. He purchased second hand clothes for Deepavali. That was the economic status of the low-caste people in India. Whenever the irrigation tank was filled in with water due to rains, his grandmother used to take him to catch fish, snails and slugs in it, which could make a good lunch for him. The family of Gunasekaran never ate a full meal, a decent meal.

One day Gunasekaran's grandmother sent him to a shop at south Keeranoor mainland where Konar people lived. He bought cooking oil in a wood-chip bottle and walked back through paddy fields – it was meant for Dalit people's transit. He saw a man coming in the opposite direction. On seeing him, Gunasekaran took one leg off the track, and gave him space to move through. The man angered by Gunasekaran's gesture gave a strong slap went on his cheek. He screamed in pain:

'Look at the cheek of the Paraya boy!' the man spat out, and then went on his way. It took me five minutes to come out of my state of shock. I put the box down and sat on the bund crying

. . . . I started walking back home. I had too many questions with myself. 'Why did that man beat me? What mistake did I do? Why did he call me a Paraya?' I didn't get any answer. . . .

The moment she heard the entire story he said, 'See we belong to a Paraya household, and they are Maravars. When men and women of the high caste come, we need to stand at least eight feet away from them. We ought to step aside to give them way. That is why the man has beaten you.' (43)

Gunasekaran suffered extremely due to the caste system. Dalits had to stay away from the upper-caste. The range of atrocities, humiliation, and suppression inflicted on the Dalit people is still extreme in India. The reader can learn that the word, "Paraya" is pejorative and it is a form of insult.

During summer holidays, Gunasekaran used to go to Tanjavur where one of his relatives Seenivachagam lived. He had a group of folk artists. They performed cultural programmes particularly "Karagattam" dance at the head of temple processions. These folk artists were interested in the voice of Gunasekaran and his folk songs. He joined them and played "thamuku" and "pampbai." He earned enough money by singing folk songs. The one month he spent in the company of folk artists was a pleasant experience in his life, and also, it helped him to pay the college and hostel fees, and in this way, he continued his studies in the college. Autobiography is a popular form of writing in Dalit literature. As Anderson rightly says:

Autobiography is a form of witnessing which matters to others. People are interested in the actual lives of others and want to know about others' past and feelings and desires. The explanation for the special appeal of autobiography is fascinating with the self and its profound, its endless mysteries. Writers of memories and life stories never lack an audience. Autobiography is a way to organize the story of a life and reflects on the past in order to better understand the present. (5-7)

In sum total, it could be said that Omprakash Valmiki and K.A. Gunasekaran led an unhappy and problematic life, and struggled for survival. The depiction of the characters as well as the environment they lived in and their experiences are closely related to the Dalit mass. Their life experience and the intended "message" of their works portray the trauma they underwent from childhood to manhood. A man must defend himself for survival, but it is not so in the case of the Dalits. Sometimes a person in his life is not recognized by his own kinsman and society, and in such a case, he expresses his pent up feelings only in his autobiography. It could thus be said that self-justification is the objective behind a person writing an autobiography, and this could be seen in the autobiographies of both Omprakash Valmiki and Gunasekaran.

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